

# Child Support Report

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## COMMISSIONER'S VOICE


**VOICE | BLOG**

## The Hague Child Support Treaty

The moment has arrived. After more than a decade of negotiation, development, and legislation, the [Hague Convention on the International Recovery of Child Support and Other Forms of Family Maintenance](#) (also known as the Hague Child Support Treaty) was formally ratified by the United States on August 30, 2016. The treaty goes into effect in the United States on January 1, 2017. In ratifying the treaty, we join 31 Convention countries in a reciprocal, multilateral agreement to enforce child support. We expect more countries to join the treaty

now that the United States is on board. With ratification, more children whose parents live in different countries will receive help obtaining child support payments.

Article II, section 2 of the United States Constitution provides that the president “shall have Power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make Treaties, provided two thirds of the Senators present concur.” It takes a long time for a treaty to become the law of the land, and the Hague Child Support Treaty was no exception. The United States approved the treaty in 2007, under the previous administration. The Senate gave its advice and consent to the treaty in 2010 and passed implementing legislation in 2014. One of the features of this treaty is that every state was required to update its interstate enforcement laws to incorporate the treaty provisions. By 2016, all 54 states and territories operating child support programs enacted the Uniform Interstate Family Support Act of 2008 (known as UIFSA 2008) to implement the treaty.

The world is getting smaller. Countries on every continent are reexamining family policies to address the needs of modern families, including families who live across international borders.

Spurred in part by the Hague treaty, societies are reexamining gender roles, considering new protections for women and children, and increasing economic opportunities for families that have nowhere else to turn.

We are witnessing a historic moment. As more countries sign on, the treaty will grow in importance and impact for families. Many people in the child support community contributed to this achievement. It has been my privilege to take part.

*Vicki Turetsky*

For more information on the treaty, refer to the "Hague Convention on the International Recovery of Child Support" section of the OCSE [International](#) webpage and Putting the 'Uniform' back in UIFSA on pages 3-4 of the [December 2015 Child Support Report](#). The January *Child Support Report* will provide more information on what to expect once the treaty goes into effect for the U.S.

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The next *Child Support Report* will be a combined Nov.-Dec. edition that will spotlight Native American Heritage Month and Veterans Day in addition to our regular features.

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## A 7-step domestic violence tune up

Michael Hayes, OCSE



In October 2015, OCSE released the [Enhancing Safe Access to Child Support](#) inventory tool for child support programs to use when they conduct a comprehensive review of their policies, procedures, and practices. We developed it to help you ensure that survivors of domestic violence have safe access to child support services.

Some of you found the nine pages of questions and ideas a little overwhelming. Others told me they know they should have done more when it came to potential domestic violence cases, but they weren't sure where to start.

In recognition of Domestic Violence Awareness Month 2016, we offer a set of “first steps” to help you enhance your program's response to domestic violence.

**1** Start with your child support application and information gathering forms. Do they include information on safety modifications that are available to survivors? Are there questions on the application that ask about safety concerns and fears? Questions about safety should be close to the front, not on the last page! **NOTE:** Asking if a parent is a victim of domestic violence or if there is a history of domestic violence is NOT likely to get you accurate information. Instead, ask if the parent would have concerns about meeting in person with the other parent or would have concerns about the other parent knowing their address or personal contact information.

**2** Review your website and your publications. Do they provide information about safe access, the options you have available for survivors, and an explanation of good cause? Do the publications list community domestic violence resources? Providing information like this signals that child support agents understand the importance of domestic violence and that it is relevant for the child support process.

**3** Find out how the TANF agency — and SNAP and child care if they have child support cooperation requirements — screens for domestic violence and offers good cause. Don't assume that everyone has extensive training or clear protocols for determining good cause. How do they inform applicants about good cause? What do parents have to provide to the eligibility agency to get good cause?

**4** Run the Family Violence Indicator numbers in your caseload. The national average is slightly more than 8 percent, but recent surveys documented that more than one third of custodial mothers reported domestic violence with their child's father. Some states, however, have flagged fewer than 2 percent of the custodial parents in their caseload.

**5** Talk with and listen to experts. You wouldn't just hand one of your staff a Spanish/English dictionary and charge them with translating your agency publications or forms, right? To provide safe access to child support, we have to translate our materials and processes into a “language” that is understandable and meaningful for survivors. State and local domestic violence program experts can help you train your staff in that new language and basic principles.

**6** Schedule training in the three Rs — Recognize, Respond, and Refer. Child support staff members need to recognize how domestic violence affects parents going through the child support process. They must be able to respond appropriately to domestic violence concerns and promote safety for parents and fellow staff. They must also be able to refer and connect survivors to community domestic violence services. OCSE has newly developed and field-tested domestic violence resources and a training curriculum that we can share with state, tribal, and local child support programs.

**7** Review the safety modifications you have made to the child support processes you offer to survivors. How does your staff handle cases with domestic violence concerns differently than regular cases? Do they notify survivors about upcoming actions that could increase the risk to them, such as suspension of a noncustodial parent's driver's or professional license, or serving of contempt papers, or garnishing wages or a bank account? Do they provide survivors with safety planning tools for in-office or court appearances or offer them alternatives to in-person appearances when their batterer is present?

While this list is not a comprehensive approach to enhancing safe access to child support services for domestic violence survivors, it is a good foundation for a program that's just started to work on this issue. It also provides a good reminder of some of the basic steps for agencies with established domestic violence efforts.

*For more, download the comprehensive program inventory and visit the OCSE [Family Violence](#) webpage. You can also contact Michael Hayes at [michael.hayes@acf.hhs.gov](mailto:michael.hayes@acf.hhs.gov) to take your next steps in creating a safer, more secure future for families impacted by domestic violence.*

## Vermont makes domestic violence training a priority

Kristen Vrancken, Staff Attorney,  
Vermont Office of Child Support

Staff members are rarely enthusiastic about daylong, summertime training workshops, but a recent domestic violence class captivated more than 100 child support staffers. In July, OCSE Senior Program Manager Michael Hayes held two Family Violence workshops to help Vermont Office of Child Support staff improve their handling of child support cases that may include domestic violence.

Our new state Office of Child Support Director, Robin Arnell, has made family violence awareness a top priority. As a first step, we are participating in the OCSE-funded [Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services grant](#) to improve resolution meetings in child support offices. This is what inspired our additional collaboration with OCSE. Ultimately, Arnell plans to implement a more expansive agency-wide family violence awareness initiative.

To accomplish this, the director wanted to bring in a trainer with a wealth of experience in this area. Arnell asked Hayes to help us launch our own family violence awareness initiative. Prior to joining OCSE, Hayes was the deputy for Family Initiatives for the Texas Child Support Division. Texas launched a number of statewide programs designed to support fragile families, including family violence collaborations to help survivors access the child support system.

The power of Hayes' workshop lies in his presentation. It is a multi-faceted approach that deploys scaffolding techniques for enhanced and interactive learning. For instance, one exercise sought to illustrate the effect trauma has on the brain and overall cognitive functioning. We tried to solve a very basic math problem while holding our breath.

We discovered that deciphering the math problem under such circumstances was nearly impossible, even for the math whizzes among us. One of our paralegals said this exercise was insightful. She described it as "a good reminder that the people we see are often dealing with so much more than their present situation."

An exercise called "If You Had to Decide" asked participants to take on the role of a family violence survivor, make decisions about child support, and deal with potential consequences. We had to make decisions and try to work the system in hopes of a favorable result. It was a fool's errand because the results are so unpredictable.

The exercise resonated with some of our regional caseworkers who often have the most personal customer relationships. One explained how her decisions affected the situation. "Even though I thought I made all the right



Michael Hayes, OCSE, during the Vermont training session.

choices for the custodial parent, in the end, it didn't result in a good outcome," she said. The exercise led her to appreciate the dynamics between the survivor and abuser. She now understands "the survivor is who knows the abuser best and what decisions are most appropriate, even if they might not seem that way from the outside." Another caseworker said the exercise made one thing very clear, "[N]o matter what gets put on the order or how it comes about, the entire family situation may or may not end up getting financially or emotionally better."

The training included videos of first-hand accounts from family violence survivors who safely and successfully maneuvered the child support process. Some attendees noted that many of the survivors did not gel with common stereotypes. "[I] didn't expect these women to be victims — they didn't seem like what you would expect," one attendee said. We also fact-checked some common misperceptions about family violence and how those misperceptions can negatively affect how professional staff interact with survivors.

Seizing upon the enthusiasm generated by the workshop, we have quickly taken steps to expand our existing family violence protocols. In September, we launched an internal Family Violence Task Force that will routinely collaborate with regional family violence programs to keep in step with best practices and local emerging issues. Vermont has changed its non-public assistance application to be more customer friendly and sensitive to family violence concerns, and we have plans to review our public assistance applications as well.

Perhaps most importantly, we have continued the internal dialogue sparked during the workshops. It has led us to sustained, open, and thoughtful conversations between colleagues throughout the Office of Child Support.

*For more information about Vermont's domestic violence initiatives, contact Robin Arnell at [robin.arnell@vermont.gov](mailto:robin.arnell@vermont.gov). For information about OCSE training, contact Michael Hayes at [michael.hayes@acf.hhs.gov](mailto:michael.hayes@acf.hhs.gov).*

## Puerto Rico financial training promotes responsible parenting

Rebeca Dorna Pesquera, Director, ASUME  
Community Relations Office

Staff and leaders from a family support and community empowerment project in Puerto Rico recently attended a series of workshops to learn how to help parents manage their finances. The program is a collaborative effort between the PR Administration for Child Support (ASUME, by its Spanish acronym), the Department of Family's Redes de apoyo familiar y convivencia comunitaria project (Family Support and Community Life Network Project, commonly referred to as Redes) and Finanzas en tus manos (Finance in your Hands).

Redes is a primary prevention program in communities with high risk factors of violence and child abuse. The Department of Families established the program to teach individuals, families, and communities how to successfully care for themselves and their children. A multidisciplinary team of social workers and psychologists embedded in 22 public housing facilities and communities work with residents to improve their socioeconomic development. Some 8 percent of residents report having a child support case.

"In ASUME, we are very excited about this collaboration, which besides being considered a best practice by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement, it is a way to promote self-sufficiency and empowerment of families and it serves as a tool to strengthen responsible parenting," said Rosabelle Padín Batista, child support director.

The workshops provided the tools Redes staff will use to teach community members how to manage their personal finances. The program will also broaden community awareness that financial management skills can reduce the stress people may feel when they worry about meeting their financial responsibilities.

Developers tailored the training to meet the resources, experiences, and needs of residents in the communities where Redes is located. Workshop topics included the protection of consumer rights and credit and cash management.

"These issues are very relevant to our work of promoting self-sufficiency, and allows us to learn how to deal with members of the communities we work with," said Stephanie Figueroa, coordinator of the Redes project.

Jeniffer Rodríguez Marrero, the Redes project coordinator stationed at the community El Maní in Mayaguez, explained that "during any crisis one must respond with urgency, in a planned and effective manner. The people of Puerto Rico are going through a hard financial crisis. It is important to empower everyone in the community with simple tools and practices that allow them to manage their particular situations and to overcome challenges."

Kurt Schindler, the director of Finance in your Hands, also welcomed the initiative noting that "working with leaders of different communities was very enriching. Seeing and understanding the different perspectives and ideas about personal finances allowed me to expand my knowledge. I think I've learned while teaching."

For more information on this training program, contact Rebeca Dorna Pesquera at [rdorna@asume.pr.gov](mailto:rdorna@asume.pr.gov).



ASUME led a collaborative initiative to provide financial education to teams of community leaders and social workers from 22 communities around the island.

## Perceptions come from the words we use

Ann Coffin, Program Director,  
Florida Child Support Program

You may not realize it, but there is a science to how people perceive things. The way we present information — the way it looks at a glance and the way it reads — can instantaneously shape a person's opinion — sometimes indelibly. That's why it is important to take a step back and look at the way child support is being perceived by those who are most impacted by it — the families.

### THE PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Look at the evolution of specific terminology we're all familiar with. Think about how someone — especially the person in question — might perceive being called something that equates to legal jargon, or worse, a parent that's "absent" or without custody. These terms can be harsh, unnecessary, and demeaning, and really serve no purpose other than to make it easier for program team members to use child support-specific shorthand when processing a case.

We are trying to remove this type of language and perception in Florida to help us achieve the following goals: improve the perception of the program, increase our approachability, and make customers feel valued rather than labeled.

### CONTENT REVIEW

Tailoring the language you use when working with customers can be critical to determining the outcome in some situations. In Florida, our customer terminology was antiquated and unfriendly in many cases. Our systems terminology was also cryptic and confusing. At first glance, it doesn't seem like it would affect our customers; but in reality, it does. What team members read from the computer system can directly influence how they relay that information back to the customer. For example, our computer system may use activity terminology like, "all tools exhausted" or "hard to enforce," but that doesn't mean we should explain what's happening on someone's case in such cold and unsympathetic terms.

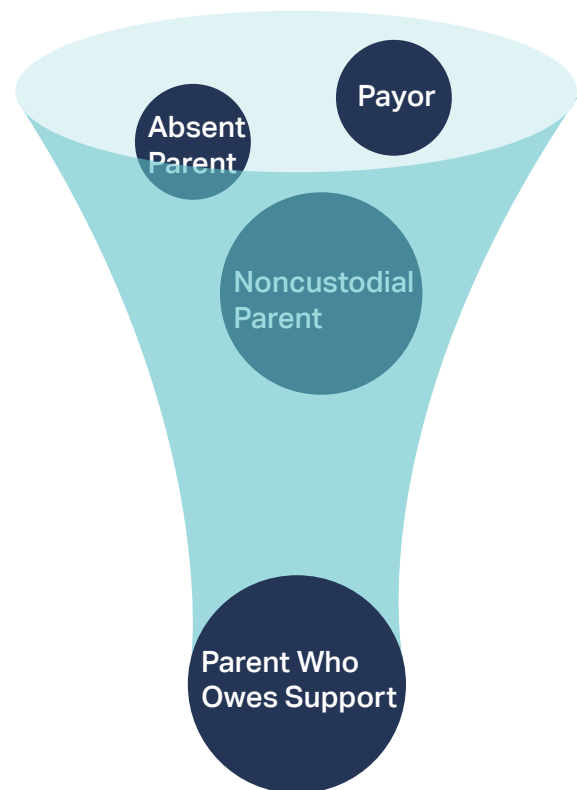
### FIRST STEPS

In Florida, we have taken strides to revise and update the program branding to be friendlier, less intimidating, and less bureaucratic. One of the most obvious ways to do this was to modify our name to simply the Child Support Program. National Child Support Enforcement Association President Dr. Steven Golightly, who is also

the child support director for Los Angeles County, CA, recently wrote about rebranding in a recent association article. He discussed the concept of rebranding the child support program name to help reinvigorate the image of the program as a whole. He believes we should strive to be more inclusive and inviting and officially change our name to be more in line with our mission, which is serving families.

Our initial approach to changing both the mindset and words we use was simple: start from the top. We told managers we expected them to use the appropriate language with their team members. Next, we began eliminating unwanted terminology and abbreviations in our notices, on our websites, and in our outreach and procedural materials. Our job is never done. We continue to find, update, and refine our terminology on a regular basis. To really help make an impact, though, we also need the support from other agencies and child support programs across the nation. The more we all work toward a goal of refining the way we let our program be perceived, the easier it will be to change the perception.

For information about Florida's changes, contact Ann Coffin at [coffina@dor.state.fl.us](mailto:coffina@dor.state.fl.us).



## New mobile app for Texas families

Charla Long, OCSE

On June 13, 2016, the Texas Child Support Division launched a mobile version of the [Child Support Interactive](#) (CSI) website that customers use to access their child support case information. Customers visiting CSI from a smartphone or tablet are automatically redirected to [CSI Mobile](#), but they can still access the desktop version if they need more detailed information.

Before developing CSI Mobile, the division's information technology section analyzed caseload data and discovered that 80 percent of child support customers viewed their case information on a mobile device.

When the division researched mobile website usability, they found that mobile-optimized websites significantly improved user experience and satisfaction. They also took into consideration that developing a mobile-friendly site rather than a downloadable app is more cost effective to create and maintain, and customers do not have to take any additional steps to access information.

The site remains consistent and user friendly no matter what device or operating system customers use to access it. For example, with CSI Mobile, there is no need to resize the screen in order to see text and images.

In the first two weeks after deployment, customers accessed CSI Mobile over 1.5 million times. In one day alone, they visited 325,000 times — more than twice the peak traffic in the month before CSI Mobile went live.

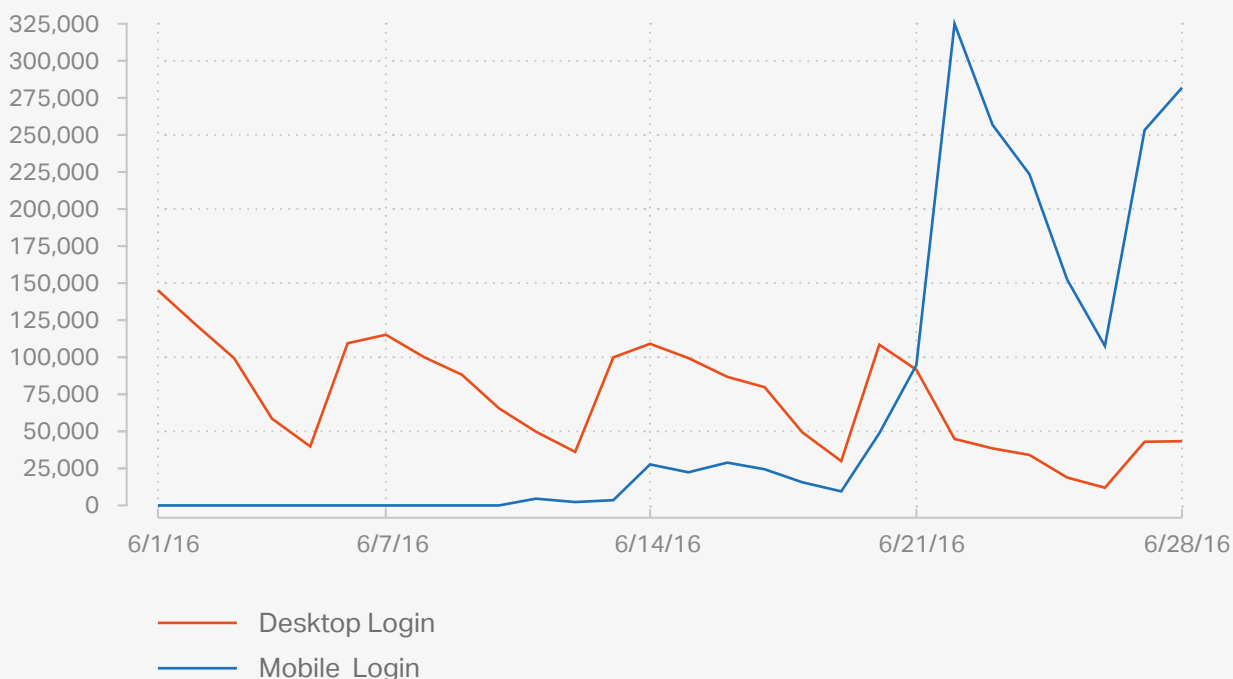
CSI Mobile provides customers the convenience of accessing the most frequently requested information on the portal, such as payments, balances, case status, and pending legal actions. Custodial parents can also generate and view payment records and income verification forms — items they need when applying for day care and housing assistance.

Additionally, CSI Mobile offers customers a new way to interact with the child support staff. The number of emailed case inquiries nearly doubled in the weeks after the mobile site launched. While this increased volume required the division to shift resources to make sure customers received a timely response, it also revealed that they had not been meeting the communication needs of a significant number of customers.

Most leading industry analysts project that within a few short years, mobile devices will overtake PCs as the most common way to access the Web. As technology evolves and expands, the Texas Child Support Division is committed to developing tools to allow customers to easily, seamlessly, and securely access case information.

For more information, contact Charla Long at [charla.long@acf.hhs.gov](mailto:charla.long@acf.hhs.gov).

Desktop and Mobile Logins for June 2016



## PROMISING PRACTICES

# Intercepting unclaimed property in California



Stephanie Moore,  
Child Support Officer, Yolo County  
Department of Child Support Services

As child support professionals, we need to create new and effective strategies to increase child support collections. In July 2014, the Yolo County Department of Child Support Services (DCSS) partnered with the California State Controller's Office (SCO) to intercept unclaimed property on behalf of custodial parents.

California's unclaimed property laws require banks, insurance companies, corporations, and other entities to report and submit their customer's property to the SCO when there has been no activity for a specific period, generally three years. California is currently in possession of more than \$7.1 billion in unclaimed property belonging to nearly 28 million individuals.

### APPLYING FOR UNCLAIMED PROPERTY

In October 2014, DCSS started the Unclaimed Property Project. Yolo county staff looked through unclaimed property rolls to see if they could find items belonging to noncustodial parents who had an arrears balance and no other ongoing child support case. Yolo County DCSS submitted 146 claims. The SCO accepted 103 of them and paid out over \$6,700.

In 2015, DCSS expanded the project to include all cases with an arrears balance even if it was an ongoing case. Between October 2015 and March 2016, staff submitted almost 1,650 claims totaling nearly \$320,000. The county is currently receiving approval and denial letters for these claims.

### REQUESTING UNCLAIMED PROPERTY

To intercept unclaimed property on behalf of custodial parents, DCSS must submit the following documents:

- Unclaimed Property Claim Affirmation form that lists the child support agency's Tax ID number and contact information;
- Copy of the oldest court order with a dollar amount to prove that the participant was ordered to pay child support before the SCO received the property;
- California Department of Child Support Services financial report showing the participant currently has an arrears balance; and
- Documentation that verifies the noncustodial parent's address matches the address of the unclaimed property registered with the SCO.

*California is currently in possession of more than \$7.1 billion in unclaimed property belonging to nearly 28 million individuals.*

When the SCO receives the claim, the computer system generates and mails a receipt to the child support office. Once SCO legal department team members review the claim for payment, they send out an approval or denial letter explaining their decision. If there is a correctable error, the SCO accepts correction documents through fax so there is no need to submit a new claim. Approved payments usually take between two and three weeks. The whole process takes about four to six months.

*For information on this program, contact Stephanie Moore at [stephanie.moore@yolocounty.org](mailto:stephanie.moore@yolocounty.org).*



## HealthCare.Gov open enrollment season

Child support caseworkers should encourage clients to check out the [HealthCare.Gov](https://www.healthcare.gov) website before open enrollment starts.

The [October-November 2015 Child Support Report](#) has information that staff can use to help parents navigate the marketplace.

## IN FOCUS

# Another successful Virginia debt compromise program

Rose Bynum, OCSE

Virginia topped last year's successful collection program by expanding it this year. During August and September 2015, the Virginia Division of Child Support Enforcement ran a debt compromise program for noncustodial parents who had Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) debt. To qualify, the parent had to have reported annual earnings of 200 percent or less of the federal poverty level for a family of two. Qualifying parents could request to have their Virginia child support debts reduced either by 5 percent or by an additional \$1 for every \$1 paid if they did two things during August or September. They had to have met with a caseworker and made a payment that was more than one of their monthly payments. Last year the program generated over \$6 million in collections.

The state expects better results this year because it expanded the program in several ways. First, officials opened eligibility to parents with intergovernmental orders — Virginia orders that other states currently enforce. Since this is uncharted territory, Virginia notified child support directors in the other states of the expansion of this initiative.

The 2016 program was also more generous to qualified noncustodial parents because last year the state forgave debt on a one-to-one basis. This year, the state forgave \$2 for every \$1 a qualified noncustodial parent paid.

Finally, officials also used a multiple channel communications campaign. They successfully reached 40,000 noncustodial parents through outbound calls and mailed postcards to the parents they could not reach by phone. Field staff also discussed the program during appointments with parents. They felt that every contact with a parent who owed support created an opportunity to increase collections because caseworkers could discuss the "right size" order for each case.

To be eligible for the debt compromise in 2016, parents who owed support must have made a payment in August or September that was above their current level of support. Nonresident eligible parents must have participated in a telephone conference with a Virginia caseworker or met with a caseworker in the state assisting with their case to qualify for the 5 percent reduction. Virginia required verification through a call from the responding jurisdiction or a transmittal and a payment in excess of current support before the parent would receive the reduction.

By the end of the program, the state collected almost \$6.8 million. Virginia will be forwarding accounting records to the responding states in October after recording all appropriate adjustments. If information was required for a court hearing, Virginia expedited accounting information for the responding jurisdiction.

Contact Program Specialist Rose Bynum at [rose.bynum@acf.hhs.gov](mailto:rose.bynum@acf.hhs.gov) for additional information.

## IMPORTANT DEADLINE

12/15 TO ENROLL FOR COVERAGE STARTING JAN 1



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## Child Support Report

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